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Peace by Piece

Recent Illinois Wesleyan graduates find that, as Peace Corps volunteers, success is often a process of patience and perspective.



Story by **TERESA SHERMAN '09**

On the day of her final farewell to the Ugandan village — and to the people who had become her family — Sarah Cowan paused in front of the inauspicious concrete building that stood as testament to more than two years of service. Behind the squat, gray-and-white walls and colorfully painted world map around the door sits a collection of more than 6,000 books, their glossy covers smudged by the fingerprints of dozens of children.

Before Cowan, a 2005 Illinois Wesleyan graduate in music education, came to the small village of Ssanje in April 2006, there wasn't a library in the entire Rakai district in south-central Uganda, an area covering almost 2,000 square miles.

In Ssanje, Cowan was assigned to a school funded by Children of Uganda, a non-profit group created to help some of the nearly 2.4 million children in the country who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty or civil conflict. Though the remote location does not have electricity or running water, Cowan soon learned that the teachers and leaders of Ssanje had a vision for their village's future.

“When they approached me with the idea for a community center, I jumped at the idea,” says Cowan. “I had learned already that, for development to be maintained, it has to come from the people.”

Cowan connected the Ssanje villagers with people from her life back home — family and friends, fellow Illinois Wesleyan graduates and the Peace Corps support network — and raised \$12,000 needed to build the library.

When Cowan's time as a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) came to a close in November 2008, Ssanje attained solar power, a few computers and Internet access, as well



As a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote village in Uganda, Sarah Cowan helped residents build a community center that includes a library and computers with Internet access.

as a book catalogue in the thousands.

Cowan's sense of tangible accomplishment is the dream of thousands of Peace Corps volunteers and applicants who have responded to the call to serve since the program's creation in 1961. That call is being heard louder than ever: this year, the Peace Corps received its largest-ever recorded number of applicants. The majority of those are recent college graduates.

One of those applicants is Emily Franzen, an education major nominated to serve in French-speaking West Africa after her December 2009 graduation. As she anticipates the radical changes to which she will need to adapt as a PCV, Franzen is also trying to stay grounded in her expectations. "If I'm able to help just one classroom of students improve their English language skills," she says, "I know the two years away from home will be time well spent."

Still, Franzen doesn't pretend to know what her service might be like. Indeed, every volunteer experience is different, as Illinois Wesleyan's long list of alumni-PCVs can attest.

In the past 10 years alone, dozens of IWU graduates have gone on to serve in Peace Corps posts from Azerbaijan to Paraguay, from Northern to Sub-Saharan Africa. For some, the experience was everything they'd hoped for; others left with feelings of frustration at all that was left unaccomplished. For most, the experience has involved adjusting to the realization that change is often difficult, and can take far longer than the span of their two-year service.

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"Time is fluid here, which makes sense considering the 130-degree heat," observes 2007 alumna Marisa Van Osdale, a health-education volunteer in Senegal at the tail-end of her service.

Van Osdale remains enthusiastic about her time in Goudoude Diobe — a village of 500 that lies four miles from a paved road — and she enjoys its stark contrast with her former life in Illinois. "I take a horse cart in and out of the village once a week to go into the city for market and Internet access," says Van Osdale, who has no running water or electricity in her concrete house.

Van Osdale knows she is still very privileged in comparison to those she serves. "Life here is hard for the people not receiving care packages from friends and family." Hunger is a very real problem, she says, citing the skyrocketing price of rice and a particularly bad rainy season. Poor water sanitation and related diseases such as dysentery and malaria are threats year-round.

Prior to arriving in Senegal, the closest thing Van Osdale had seen to the level of poverty in Goudoude Diobe was during a May Term trip to South Africa. But, she admits, "By no means was I prepared."

Despite its austere way of life, Osdale describes her village as a place "filled with laughter, jokes, smiles and squeals of delight from children playing games."

Like Cowan, Van Osdale measures her success by keeping a number of short-term goals. Since her arrival, she has worked closely with teachers at the local primary school and at a middle school in the nearby village of Thilogne. Unlike Uganda, education is free in Senegal up to age 16. Government stipends go toward school supplies, clothing and even housing costs for children who live too far away for daily travel.

"Girls' education is at the forefront of every new development push," adds Van Osdale. In Senegal, only 15 percent of girls are able to go to secondary school. Yet those who have been educated tend to have fewer and

healthier babies later in life, take more active roles in their communities and are better able to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

Each year, Peace Corps Senegal awards scholarships to female middle-school students to continue their studies. Last year, there was enough money to distribute two scholarships to a pair of children whom Van Osdale taught at the Thilogne middle school. “Both girls had radiant smiles when I gave them their scholarships,” she says. The girls plan to continue their schooling through college at the University of Dakar in Senegal’s capital.

In the few months that remain in Van Osdale’s assignment, she says she looks forward to continuing her work with the girls at the middle school, teaching primary school children about basic sanitation, planting trees in the village and “letting people know a little bit about real American culture.”

Though Van Osdale does miss her family and friends in the U.S., nothing can douse the spirit of adventure that she wakes up to every morning, even on days when she gets frustrated with the cows mooing at 5 a.m. “Interacting with the kids, talking about resting and eating right with pregnant mothers and drinking traditional tea with the villagers makes it all worthwhile,” she says.

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Because of the length, difficulty and low financial reward for their service, the question “Will it be worth it?” often weighs heavily on the minds of potential Peace Corp volunteers.

Hearing about the successes of volunteers like Cowan and Van Osdale is reassuring to nominees like Franzen. But nagging doubts remain.

“As excited as I am about what I can accomplish as a teaching volunteer, it’s daunting to think of how limited the resources are going to be,” says Franzen. “I’ve taught in classrooms with ‘Smart Board’ technology,” she adds, referring to a popular interactive, electronic whiteboard. “I know Peace Corps is going to be a major wake-up call.”

That wake-up call sounded loud and clear to Allison Bannerman ’07. The political science major studied international issues while at IWU and planned to further her education in law and international studies after her Peace Corps tour.

“I had my life pretty well mapped out when I graduated, and Peace Corps was a natural fit — or at least that’s what I thought at the time,” says Bannerman.

In the fall of 2007, Bannerman started in-country training for the Peace Corps in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan. Five months later, she was back in her hometown of Bainbridge Island, Wash.

Currently a law student at Washington University, she doesn’t regret her decision to terminate her Peace Corps service early.

“Every assignment is different, and I realized almost immediately that mine wouldn’t allow me to fulfill any of the reasons I wanted to join,” she says.

According to Bannerman, none of the programs she wanted to implement were possible and the ones in place had deficiencies too steep to overcome.

“The tools I had available to me were not the tools I needed to meet my goals,” she says. “I wasn’t the right person for the job and the job wasn’t the right one for me. That realization was the final straw that made me leave.”

Resigning in the winter of 2008, Bannerman became one of an estimated 30 percent of volunteers who choose not to complete their service each year. Still, Bannerman cites many reasons why her shortened experience was worthwhile. She still keeps in touch with friends she made through the Peace Corps and returned to Kazakhstan this summer to visit.

Most importantly, she says, “It taught me to be true to myself and the causes that I’m most passionate about. Peace Corps isn’t a feel-good vacation. As a volunteer, you have a responsibility to serve your community to the best of your abilities. If you can’t offer that, you owe it to them and to yourself to rethink your commitment.”

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Ryan Smith didn’t join the Peace Corps expecting to change the world.

“My service was a tiny, two year slice of a giant, 50-year development experiment,” says Smith, who worked in Gambia to promote sustainable community development and environmental conservation.

“When I lost sight of the big picture, I started feeling like I was just banging my head against a wall.”

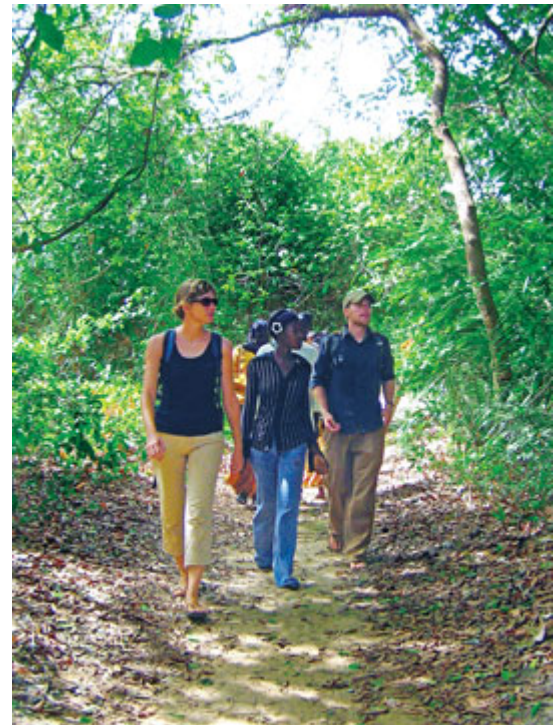
Smith’s wife and fellow 2007 IWU graduate Leslie Coleman experienced similar feelings as a Peace Corps volunteer working with the ecotourism and research units of Gambia’s Department of Parks and Wildlife Management. Every day, she says, was a balancing act between succeeding on a “small-scale” and questioning her impact.

“Misuse of project funds was something that I was able to stop by speaking with my supervisors,” Coleman says. “But, now that I’m gone, I don’t really have any doubt that the corruption has resumed.”

Still, thanks to what Coleman describes as the passion, intelligence and dedication of several Gambian coworkers, most of her projects reached fruition — though her assignment was aborted early due to a medical condition Ryan suffered that could not be treated in Gambia.

Smith is healthy now, and he and Coleman are back to work as English teachers in Thailand.

Though proud of her PC service, Coleman admits that the experience made her less inclined to pursue a career in international development.



Leslie Coleman (above left) leads a field trip to a Gambian nature reserve with an environmental club she and her husband Ryan Smith launched.

“Every day I was faced with cultural differences — a lack of environmental concern, non-democratic ideals and the inferior position of women — that seemed to me to run too deep to change,” she says. “As an outsider, I felt my capacity to address them was limited.”

Coleman says she was sometimes not taken as seriously at work as her husband, while their Western gender roles often drew sharp comments from their neighbors.

“Some people thought I wasn’t a good wife because my husband helped cook, clean and sweep the front porch. That’s something that the older generation will probably never understand,” she says. “But when we heard it from young men, we just joked with them about how they needed to learn to do the same, or else no young woman would want to marry them.”

Coleman also recalls the weekly club for students that she and Ryan hosted where conversations on social and environmental issues revealed how much Americans and Gambians shared core cultural values.

“I learned so much from my students, just seeing the challenges they face growing up as young Gambians,” says Coleman. “They made me think critically about many of the assumptions I came here with.”

Looking back, Smith regards his initial reasons for joining the Peace Corps as fairly selfish. “I wanted the challenge,” he says. “I wanted to learn a new language. I wanted to see if I could go two years without the amenities we’re so used to. I wanted this experience to make me a better person.”

Ultimately, what changed Smith was a lesson in selflessness.



Ryan Smith prepares a mixture for a mud stove with children from his host family in Gambia.

“Many of the Gambians we lived with seemed to be of the mindset that they’re all but ignored by the rest of the world,” he says. “But PCVs put their American lives to work side by side with them in the fields. They eat out of the same bowl as local families. I think that says to them, ‘You’re the ones who matter.’”

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When the final countdown to Cowan’s departure from Uganda began, the people of Ssanje held multiple parties and dances in her honor.

“They kept thanking me for everything I’d done for them,” she recalls, “but I couldn’t make them realize that I was the one who should be grateful for all they had done for me.”

In her role as a music teacher in elementary schools in the Chicago suburbs, Cowan presents pictures, stories and videos from her time in Uganda. Her stories inspire students and fellow teachers to send books, school supplies and encouraging letters to the children of Ssanje.

Likewise, Cowan says that fellow PCVs who have also returned home continue to offer friendship and support.

“It’s really an experience that everyone involved carries with them for a lifetime.”

Illinois Wesleyan PCVs make it a special point to keep in touch, Coleman adds. “The class of 2007 is really active.” During her time in Gambia, she and Smith met up with alumnae like Van Osdale and Jessica Scates in Senegal for a PCV softball tournament. “It was really enlightening to compare our experiences,” says Coleman.

According to Franzen, even those just considering joining are invited into the PC alumni community. “I’ve gotten to talk with so many volunteers, most of them IWU alums. They’ve all shared really great advice,” Nevertheless, Franzen has a difficult time imagining life as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa. “I have this image of myself standing on the porch of a thatched hut, looking out into the jungle and thinking, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’” she says.

The idea is both terrifying and thrilling to Franzen, who looks forward to experiencing what she describes as the “Peace Corps dualities” — teaching and being taught, wrestling with prejudice and facing her own, failing miserably and succeeding wildly.

The author of this story, Teresa Sherman, graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 2009 as an English-writing and history double major. She is now a Peace Corp volunteer teaching English in the Agstafa region of northwestern Azerbaijan.